

Listen to voters, fund CHIP

By Independent Record - 02/22/09

Sen. Dave Lewis' fiscal responsibility has always been an asset to Montana.

The Helena Republican, a former state budget director, knows a thing or two about living within the state's financial means. In this tough economic crisis, fiscal responsibility and careful oversight of upcoming stimulus project spending are sorely needed in our federal and state government.

Yet, Lewis' assumption last week that the downturn in the economy outweighs the will of the people is misplaced.

Lewis led a handful of Republicans on a budget panel who, on a tie 4-4 vote Wednesday, effectively blocked funding for the expansion of the Children's Health Insurance Plan, or CHIP.

Although the vote is only a first step in the lengthy budgeting process, those Republicans made it clear they intend to question whether CHIP should be funded — and to start looking for ways to scale back state spending for the next two years.

They cited the reduction of \$250 million in the state budget as a reason not to fund the nearly \$20 million per year program, an initiative passed by voters last November which would insure approximately 30,000 children in Montana currently without insurance.

Seventy percent of Montana voters approved Initiative 155 to expand CHIP and Medicaid, two government-funded insurance programs for low- and middle-income families. The state and federal government share the costs of the programs.

I-155 put the expansion into state law, but ballot measures cannot appropriate money. That part is up to the 2009 Montana Legislature.

And that's exactly what the Legislature needs to do: Fund CHIP.

Delaying funding for CHIP until 2012 directly violates the will of the strong majority of Montanans who voted for this measure, and leaves tens of thousands of children — Montana kids — without proper insurance.

Cue the "socialized medicine," "parental irresponsibility," "welfare freeloaders" and other remarks about this measure "killing old people."

Save it. That's nonsense.

We're talking about children here, children in need of proper care.

The people of Montana didn't vote for this measure based on a projected \$1 billion surplus at the time, as Lewis and others conclude.

They voted on it because it's the right thing to do.

The program works like this:

Under the voter-approved expansion, children would be covered by Medicaid if their family earns up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$32,560 a year for a family of three. The income ceiling for CHIP eligibility would increase to 250 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$44,000 a year for a family of three.

The current income ceiling for CHIP in Montana is 175 percent of the federal poverty level, and about 17,000 kids are covered under the program now. Medicaid currently is available only to children whose families are at

100 percent of the poverty level for ages 6 to 18, and 133 percent for younger children.

It's our duty as Montanans to ensure the basic needs of children are met, that the vulnerability of life as an 18-and-under child isn't complicated by a lack of health insurance.

Now, more than ever, as the economy continues to put people out of work and more families are doing without insurance, CHIP is drastically needed. Too many families are one tragedy away from spiraling into financial ruin.

We lived up to our bargain, now legislators, you live up to yours.